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Customer Service: Reconnecting with Customers

By Niki Stojnic

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No one likes to be put on hold or to endure high-pressure sales tactics.

Even business owners, who, after all, are also consumers, probably hate the “hard sell” that is common at many firms. Yet companies often don’t let this shared experience inform their own transactions with customers. This disconnection from the consumer’s perspective can make for bad service.

It doesn’t have to be this way, says Howard Lee,

founder and CEO of [Hyperquality.com](#), a Seattle-based consulting firm that assists company call centers in improving their customer assistance quality.

Lee, who has long studied the good and bad of customer service, maintains one of the biggest mistakes customer-service workers make is to assume what customers will say before they say it. Erasing assumptions and actually listening to customers sounds simple enough, but it can lead to clearer communication, says Lee, who has 23 years of experience in the field, with time as CEO of PhotoWorks and as a senior vice president of Disney Direct.

Another major problem for businesses is underestimating the cost of poor customer service. Consumers who experience bad service can be deadly to a firm. Making the extra effort and expense to communicate with customers, whether by telephone or some other means, can make a major difference for a business.

But when things inevitably do go wrong, there are proven strategies for soothing the savage customer beast. Lee stresses a company should acknowledge the problem immediately and ask, “How can we improve our service?” And, as difficult as it might be, it’s important to “say it with a smile,” whether the conversation is in person or over the phone.

Here are some examples of the local businesses that Lee cites as doing an excellent job with customer service. He categorizes their approach in three distinct styles:

- “Off-the-charts” service—The Herbfarm restaurant in Woodinville is one example of a firm that goes above and beyond customer expectations, with details that make guests feel special: “They go out of their way to delight you with details,” Lee says. “They have your name on a plate. They make you feel like it’s all about you.”
- Familiar service—This style is employed by many neighborhood coffee shops by creating a cohesive ambiance that extends from décor to the baristas who know your order by heart. Seeing a friendly face in a familiar environment day in and day out, says Lee, builds understanding between the serviceperson and the consumer.

- Deep-knowledge service—Businesses that cultivate encyclopedic product knowledge among their employees can be as comforting as the “familiar service” style. Swansons Nursery and Sur La Table are two local companies, says Lee, that do this well. At Dunn Lumber recently, Lee encountered another example: “I walk in and said, ‘I need to shingle my garage.’ They asked questions [and] the next thing I knew, I walked out with everything I needed to do the job.”

As for companies with poor customer service, Lee, of course, won’t name names. But, as a general example, he points to auto dealerships and the inevitable customer discomfort they create. “It’s universal how poorly that process is managed,” he says.

The root of the problem, Lee explains, comes from the pressure on the salesperson from management, with a commission hanging in the balance. That structure shifts the experience away from buyers. “It isn’t the salesperson’s personal process,” says Lee. “It should be about the customer’s process.”

That, at least, is one thing both consumers and business owners can agree on.

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